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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

22 April 1985

China's Malipo Campaign: The Military Benefits [REDACTED]

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SUMMARY

The extent of Chinese military pressure along the border with Vietnam has been a matter of concern and confusion among ASEAN officials and Cambodian resistance leaders. To many observers, Chinese assaults against Vietnam have appeared insignificant and, compared with Vietnam's 1985 dry season offensive in Cambodia, have involved few casualties and limited damage. In fact, along a 10-kilometer-wide and 5-kilometer-deep front in the remote and mountainous terrain of China's Malipo County, the opposite has been true. We believe Beijing has intended the sometimes fierce fighting along this desolate front to press Vietnam politically, but the reasons for the location and style of the battles go beyond foreign policy goals. In a period of rejuvenation of China's outdated armed forces, Malipo has proved an exceptional testing ground for troops and equipment. But although the Chinese can reap both political and military rewards from its Malipo campaign, we believe the cost in lives and economic resources has proven too great for China to consider creating other similar fronts. [REDACTED]

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This memorandum was prepared by [REDACTED] Office of East Asian Analysis, [REDACTED] Information available as of 22 April 1985 was used in its preparation. Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to the Chief, Defense Issues Branch, China Division, OEA, on [REDACTED]

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The Malipo Front

Chinese troops initially crossed the Vietnamese border south of Malipo in April 1984--during President Reagan's visit to Beijing--and took control of at least five hilltops, some 1 to 2 kilometers inside Vietnam. Since then, in hand-to-hand combat from entrenched and bunkered positions, Chinese and Vietnamese infantry forces have attacked and counterattacked for control of the more vulnerable hilltops. In addition, a senior Vietnamese general, in an interview with a Western journalist, recently estimated that China has fired half a million rounds of artillery and mortar shells into Vietnam's Ha Tuyen Province over the past year. Today, Chinese forces retain control of most higher peaks in this area of the border. Many of the smaller hills have traded hands several times. [REDACTED]

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Chinese Shelling: The Daily Pressure

Although the Chinese are using 122-mm, 130-mm, and 152-mm artillery pieces to shell the Vietnamese the vast majority of rounds are fired from shorter range weapons such as 60-mm, 82-mm, and 120-mm mortars and recoilless rifles used by Chinese infantry regiments. The mortars have a maximum range of six kilometers and are ideal for the close-in fighting typical along the Malipo front. [REDACTED]

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The human and materiel price of the Malipo campaign has been considerable. By their own accounts, Chinese forces have fought hundreds of battles for the hilltops and casualties have been substantial [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] A Chinese provincial radio broadcast in June reported on a newly designed military ambulance that had evacuated 500 wounded from the Malipo front in the first two months of fighting alone. [REDACTED]

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The bloodiest fighting took place in February, when the Chinese threw two divisions--or 24,000 men--into the fray.

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Disruptions to the local Chinese economy--with a range of 50,000 to 120,000 men in the field over the past year--also appear to be substantial.

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If Malipo has been costly for the Chinese, Vietnam also has paid a high price for its stalwart defense of Ha Tuyen Province. Vietnamese forces--which we roughly estimate to number 30,000 in the area--have not retreated in the face of overwhelming Chinese tactical superiority.

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China's Strategy of A Thousand Thorns

China's military leaders call these battles and seizures of territory a strategy of "a thousand thorns" that places military and psychological pressure on the Vietnamese.

[REDACTED] the strategy calls for the occupation of small segments of Vietnamese territory along the border with

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[redacted]

the Vietnamese then forced to try to dislodge the occupying Chinese forces. By adopting this policy, Beijing believes it can engage Vietnamese forces in protracted combat--forcing the Vietnamese to initiate some battles--without the international condemnation that would result from a major Chinese attack. Moreover, the Chinese calculate that their policy will provide territorial bargaining chips for any future political negotiations with Hanoi.¹ [redacted]

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But although this strategy suits Beijing's political purposes, it is also motivated by a pragmatic desire to compensate for China's serious military shortcomings:

- o Unlike some of the newly mechanized Chinese infantry forces along the Sino-Soviet border,² ground force divisions in southern China are best prepared for infantry operations and for fighting from heavily fortified positional defenses. The terrain of Malipo County plays to these strengths, allowing for little use of tanks or highly mobile, mechanized infantry forces.
- o China's military forces are poorly equipped to protect lengthy logistics lines, particularly in the face of enemy air power, but shallow ground incursions just inside Vietnam allow for logistics lines on Chinese soil to be protected from potential airstrikes by stationary CSA-1 surface-to-air missile batteries and fighter aircraft operating from permanent installations.
- o China's air force is ill-prepared to provide close-air support to Chinese infantry forces penetrating deep into Vietnam. But with Chinese long-range artillery guns firing from secure positions within Malipo County, ground troops receive the artillery support needed to soften up Vietnamese fortifications preceding an infantry attack. [redacted]

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[redacted]

[redacted] Beijing appears to be concerned that artillery fire directed at Ha Giang might prompt the Vietnamese to mount major counterattacks or large artillery bombardments into Malipo County. Thus, the Chinese can wage bloody fighting south of Malipo, but still control escalation of the conflict. [redacted]

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Beyond Politics

The Chinese military press is increasingly highlighting the value of Vietnamese border fighting as much as a training ground for Chinese infantry forces as an international political statement. A 7 April article in the Liberation Army Daily boasted that the border fighting has "trained a new generation of reliable soldiers." [REDACTED]

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Using the Vietnam conflict as a training ground, in fact, appears to be military policy. China's aging high command is well aware of the lack of combat experience in the Chinese Army and appears to relish the chance to test the mettle of its recently rejuvenated officer corps.

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What's Next?

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Beijing shows no signs of changing its strategy of "a thousand thorns." China has at least seven combat divisions [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] a total of some 90,000 men field deployed near Malipo.

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[REDACTED] Chinese engineers, moreover, continue to improve road networks along the border, and the Chinese have even built all-weather roads leading to two contested hilltops just inside Vietnam, suggesting that the Chinese intend to keep troops on Vietnamese soil indefinitely. [REDACTED]

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Although we believe the fighting at Malipo will continue--intensifying when Beijing seeks to score political points--we doubt the Chinese are prepared to open up any new "Malipo salients." There would be little additional political mileage to be gained because Beijing seeks to avoid criticism that it is the aggressor; secondly, a new front would create an additional drain on Chinese economic resources. The Chinese military, moreover, needs no new southern training ground because it has been able rotate various units and officers through Malipo. Finally, the tenacity with which the Vietnamese have fought against numerically superior forces for the hilltops of Ha Tuyen Province will give the the Chinese leadership pause before contemplating the opening of any new "running sores" along the Sino-Vietnamese frontier. [REDACTED]

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We believe that Vietnamese forces will continue to react strongly to Chinese forays on the tactical level but the "thousand thorns" are likely to have little effect on overall Vietnamese policy. Beijing's actions did not deter Hanoi's largest dry season offensive in six years and we detect no effort to move more Vietnamese divisions to the Chinese border. Indeed, on 13 February Vietnamese Foreign Minister Thach told the Australian Ambassador in Hanoi that, unlike last spring, he had had fewer sleepless nights recently because of urgent messages from commanders on the Chinese frontier. [REDACTED]

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Hanoi's leaders appear to be gauging correctly the limits of the Chinese strategy and display confidence that local commanders can successfully manage the pressure. The Vietnamese probably will continue to avoid any temptation to match the Chinese buildup opposite Ha Tuyen Province, an act that would risk escalated fighting in an area of limited strategic significance. China's policy of keeping border tensions within carefully controlled bounds--not building up, for example, along traditional invasion corridors--has not been lost on Hanoi and gives the Vietnamese little motivation to respond in kind to Chinese provocations. [REDACTED]

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